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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the importance of teaching issues related to sexual identity in English-as-a-Second-Language (ESL) classrooms, highlighting lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgendered (LGBT) individuals. Though the paper focuses on postsecondary students, much of the material can apply to other settings with modification. The paper looks at the following: why educators should teach sexual identity issues in ESL classes (e.g., education is an important way to counteract prejudice); the heterosexual educator's special obligation to teach lesbian and gay issues; preparing to teach sexual identity issues; concerns about addressing sexual identity issues; ways of introducing sexual identity issues in ESL classes; instructional materials; and student responses. The paper concludes that, given the view among ESL professionals that critical pedagogy is an important approach to teaching ESL and writing to nonnative speakers of English, it is appropriate that ESL and second language writing programs and educators give attention to the rights, needs, and inclusion of LGBT students as well as to the education of all students on sexual identity issues. (Contains 33 references.) (SM)

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ED 474 464

# Teaching Sexual Identity Issues In ESL Classes

## Introduction

Preparing to teach an ESL Grammar class one day recently, I was looking through upcoming exercises on adjective clauses in the class textbook. Suddenly I sat up straight and exclaimed out loud; to my surprise, right there in "the Azar book," I saw the following sentence: "When I went to Alex's house to drop off some paperwork, I met Jerry, who is his longtime partner" (Azar, 1999, p. 291). My first reaction was to celebrate the mention in an ESL textbook of a gay couple. Immediately afterward, however, I thought about how sad it was that one such sentence in a 450-page book should be cause for celebration. Discussion of sexual identity issues in our ESL classrooms, our textbooks, and in our professional conversations in journals and at conferences, is still far too rare. (I have since seen, or been made aware of, a few other texts that refer to sexual identity issues, such as Folse (1996); Clarke, Dobson, & Silberstein (1996); Thewlis (1997); and Quann, & Satin, (2000). (And, to give credit where credit is due, note that three of these are University of Michigan titles, so I applaud that publisher). I did, however, use this one sentence in the Azar book as an opportunity to discuss with my students, briefly, how glad I was to see that sentence, and how sorry I was that there weren't more like it in ESL textbooks. I particularly made a point of having this brief discussion because I knew that one student in the class was a lesbian.

"Sexual identity issues" include issues related to homosexuality, heterosexuality, bisexuality, and transgender. Since heterosexuality is generally the unmarked norm, what is most necessary to speak out about is issues affecting lesbians and gay men; also, many of

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the points made in this paper also apply to issues regarding bisexuals and the transgendered. For convenience, I use the initials LGBT to refer to this list: lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgendered. Even when I use the terms "lesbian and gay," I generally mean to include all four populations (and any combinations or variations thereof) in LGBT. Note too that the word "queer" has recently been reclaimed to mean the range of non-majority sexual identities.

Issues of sexual identity are part of a larger group of issues related to "identity" itself: national identity, ethnic identity, gender identity, class identity, religious identity, and all the other aspects which make up individuals' and groups' identities. I also acknowledge that identities cannot always be labeled, classified, or pigeonholed, and that identities can be fluid, as queer theorists remind us. For example, in the past few years I have had two students whose sex I was not immediately sure of; for some time in each case, I did not know if the person was female or male. Another student dressed in a very stereotypically feminine way when she joined our program, but during the next several weeks became progressively more androgynous in her appearance; being away from her country, culture, and family, she felt comfortable exploring a less defined identity than the one she had grown up with.

In this paper, I speak mainly of ESL classes in United States settings, as those are the settings I am familiar with. I believe that much of what I say here applies in other settings, but I understand that teachers in other settings must take into account the cultures and values found there, and accordingly make their own decisions regarding teaching these issues. For example, a recent book edited by educators in Japan sheds light on the particular cultural situation of lesbians, gays, bisexuals, and transsexuals in that country: Queer Japan (Summerhawk, McMahill, & McDonald, 1998). EFL teachers in Japan, or ESL/EFL teachers in other countries with students from Japan, might use such resources in thinking about how they might address sexual identity issues in their classes. In this paper I also focus mainly but not exclusively on classes at the post secondary level; again, I

believe that much of this material applies in other settings such as elementary and secondary classes, with appropriate adaptations for the age level in question.

An instructor wishing to teach sexual identity issues in university ESL classes faces several difficult questions with serious pedagogical, cultural, political and emotional implications. Some of the questions apply to any teacher who chooses to address sexual identity issues. Other questions are particular to the ESL classroom. In addition, I believe that heterosexual teachers have a particular obligation to consider addressing lesbian and gay issues, as such teachers may be less vulnerable to negative consequences of such teaching than their homosexual colleagues. Here I do not address the question of whether lesbian and gay teachers should "come out" to their students, as I believe that this is a very individual decision. Nor can I or do I provide definitive answers or prescriptions for teachers, but rather list some considerations involved and offer some suggestions.

## Why Educators Should Teach Sexual Identity Issues

First, ESL teachers have to engage with the basic question of whether teachers do in fact have a responsibility to teach sexual identity issues. I believe that they do; these issues have been too long hidden and treated as shameful, or at least as topics which are too private for classroom discussion. Yet education is the only way to counter prejudices and ignorance.

Second, teachers need to consider whether it is appropriate to teach such issues in ESL classes, whose main purpose is the teaching of language and writing skills. I believe it is appropriate. Discussion of lesbian and gay issues should not be confined to (ghettoized in, if you will) particular classes about the topic, which are in any case still quite rare, and which only a few students take. As Barnard (1994) puts it, "Queer concerns...must infiltrate every aspect of every curriculum" (p. 26). Language cannot and should not be taught without content, without consciousness, or without conscience. "Social" or "political" issues cannot be ignored in the educational process. It is now widely recognized that, in

reality, all teaching is ideological; even the choice not to address social or political issues is an ideological choice. Barnard (1994) further states that "Teaching never can be a neutral activity: the ways we define our disciplines, the texts we teach, the ways in which we teach them...--all these choices...embody specific ideological assumptions and have far-reaching effects both inside and outside the classroom" (p. 26).

It is important to remember that there are lesbian and gay students in ESL classes, and that ESL students have brothers, sisters, and friends who are lesbian and gay. These students, like non-ESL students, are affected in their growth and even in their educational development by the mention or non-mention of lesbian/gay issues in class. Lesbian and gay students "rarely have...seen themselves represented in a class or been encouraged to speak freely about their lives..." and are "forced to circumvent the drive for self-assertion and self-revelation, resulting in patterns that disable them as writers and, in turn, affect their education in untold ways" (Hart & Parmenter, 1992, p. 155). In other words, it is important that lesbians and gays, and their experiences, are made visible, not only for reasons of justice but for reasons of educational development and equity. As Crumpacker and Vander Haegen (1993) put it, "To gay and lesbian students...an incomplete curriculum suggests that they are to see themselves as deviant, psychologically abnormal, invisible..." (p. 95). They go on to make the very important point that "Expanding the curriculum is just as necessary for 'straight' students, however, as such expansion requires them to confront their prejudices and move beyond the limited world views with which they may have entered college" (p. 95). ESL students, whether homosexual or heterosexual, are often young (18-22 years old), are at a point where they are thinking about their own sexuality and that of others, and are often thirsty for knowledge which will help them in this process.

## The Heterosexual Educator's Special Obligation to Teach Lesbian and Gay Issues

It is a "luxury" to be able to choose whether to deal with these issues at all, a luxury that heterosexual teachers have but that many lesbian and gay teachers do not have. It is

unjust to leave the issue completely to lesbian and gay teachers to deal with, as if it is only their issue (Vandrick, 1997). Justice issues are everyone's issues. Nelson (1993) addresses this point when she says that many ESL teachers say that they are not prejudiced, yet feel no obligation to bring up a gay-related issue, or "initiate criticism of the near-complete absence of anything gay in our materials and curricula" or "express concern that our gay students are getting the same opportunities for self-expression as our straight students" (p. 148). Nelson asks, "If you're white, does that mean you never bring up issues that affect people of color? If you're a man, does that mean you never address issues that affect women?" and goes on to urge straight teachers to bring up these issues: "Those of you who are straight, who enjoy heterosexual privilege, have a kind of authority because you are considered respectable. What you say about gay people can carry a lot of weight, can have a lot of influence. We need allies. Being heterosexual is not the same as being heterosexist" (p. 149). Loutzenheiser (1996), too, argues that heterosexual teachers must address these issues to erase the notion that the only people who care to talk about heterosexism and homophobia are gays, lesbians, and bisexuals. Heterosexual educators must also speak out because their very heterosexuality gives them a measure of privacy and protection that gay, lesbian, and bisexual instructors do not possess. (p. 62).

Heterosexual teachers may have concerns about whether, in the course of addressing gay and lesbian issues, they may inadvertently say something ignorant, insensitive, or inappropriate. Is it appropriate for a heterosexual teacher to take it upon herself/himself to "explain" lesbian and gay issues? I have certainly struggled with this issue myself. But I believe that the answer is affirmative, with the caveat that if one is to teach and write about these issues, one should educate oneself carefully, and be willing to be corrected. The reasons to teach, speak, and write about lesbian and gay issues outweigh the possibility of making unintentional mistakes in doing so.

## Preparing to Teach Sexual Identity Issues

An ESL instructor who would like to educate herself or himself about sexual identity issues, and particularly about such issues in the context of pedagogy, may want to situate such teaching in the context of critical and feminist pedagogies, which examine such questions as the following: Who has power in schools and societies? How is that power maintained? What can be done to empower the less powerful and the powerless members of society, and to facilitate self-empowerment among the powerless? What is the place of schools and teachers in this process? Educators who believe that the tenets of critical and feminist pedagogies have validity will surely conclude that teaching for inclusion must include recognizing lesbian and gay students, and recognizing the importance of promoting justice and equity for those of any sexual identity.

In addition, instructors may want to read in the area of queer theory, a burgeoning field which emerged in the late 1980s from the earlier field termed gay and lesbian studies, and which provides context and support for those wishing to teach about sexual identity. According to Seidman (1996a), queer theory

> has accrued multiple meanings, from a merely useful shorthand way to speak of all gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered experiences to a theoretical sensibility that pivots on transgression or permanent rebellion. I take as central to Queer theory its challenge to what has been the dominant foundational concept of both homophobic and affirmative homosexual theory: the assumption of a unified homosexual identity. (p. 11)

Seidman says, further, that queer theory has recently

> sought to shift the debate somewhat away from explaining the modern homosexual to questions of the operation of the hetero/homosexual binary, from an exclusive preoccupation with homosexuality to a focus on heterosexuality as a social and political organizing principle, and from a politics of minority interest to a politics of knowledge and difference. (p. 9).

Queer theory addresses such areas as the construction of sexual identity; the politics of homosexuality; performance/appearance aspects of sexual identity; the intersections of sexual identities with gender, race and class identities; the politics of AIDS; the politics of gay drag; the politics of gay pornography; "butch" identity; and lesbian and gay literature (Beemyn & Eliason, 1996; Fuss, 1991; Phelan, 1997; Raffo, 1997; Seidman, 1996b), to touch on just a few of the many and complex topics now being addressed in academic and other forums. Queer theory specifically in the realm of pedagogy is also addressed in several recent publications (Eisen & Hall, 1996; Malinowitz, 1995; Zimmerman & McNaron, 1996).

A must-read article on how queer theory can be employed to think usefully about sexual identity issues and the ESL classroom is Cynthia Nelson's 1999 TESOL Quarterly article, "Sexual Identities in ESL: Queer Theory and Classroom Inquiry." She believes that "a queer theoretical framework may be more useful pedagogically than a lesbian and gay one because it shifts the focus from inclusion to inquiry, that is, from including minority sexual identities to examining how language and culture work with regard to all sexual identities" (p. 371). The article includes a fascinating dissection of an actual class discussion of the issue of people's reactions to seeing two people of the same sex holding hands, a discussion in which the teacher attempts to focus on why we interpret the way we do, and how we learn that interpretation. This discussion mainly avoids the kind of judgmental focus on whether LGBT identities and behaviors are right or wrong, acceptable or not acceptable, that such discussions perhaps more frequently fall into, and thus provides a useful stimulus and food for thought about pedagogical approaches to queer issues.

## Concerns About Addressing Sexual Identity Issues

Assuming that a teacher has made the decision to discuss sexual identity in the ESL writing classroom, and to be proactive in working against homophobia, other concerns may then arise about the teaching itself. Two of these are the concern about cultural differences

in the ESL classroom, and the teacher's concern about how students will regard her if she teaches lesbian and gay topics.

How does one counter the argument that different cultures have different mores regarding homosexuality, and that it is not the teacher's business to "preach" against some students' beliefs and mores? It is true that ESL teachers in particular need to be knowledgeable about and respectful of their students' cultures, and to be very careful about situations where there are conflicts among cultures, such as between a student's home culture(s) and the culture(s) she/he encounters in the United States. (Although teachers should educate themselves about various cultures, they should also be careful not to essentialize or make assumptions about students' home cultures, which are by no means homogenous and predictable.) Ultimately, though, when there is an issue of justice and freedom and respect for all people, educators have to find a way, while respecting various cultures, to ensure that the claims of justice are met. Teaching critically, and setting up classes so that students can think and discuss topics critically, will facilitate examination of assumptions and openness to other ways of living and thinking.

There are (at least) two major aspects of cultural resistance to discussion of homosexuality. The first is religious. Some students say unambiguously that homosexuality is wrong according to their religions, and that nothing can change their minds about this. The second aspect is more generally "cultural": students have absorbed from their societies in general, from their families, schools, and peers, the perception that homosexuality is wrong and/or perverse. The first aspect, the religious one, is hard to counter, first because many religious believers believe so strongly and fervently that their religion is right and unchangeable, and second because most people instinctively do not want to attack or even question someone else's religious beliefs, out of respect. But we cannot refrain from addressing lesbian and gay issues just because some students might object. Unfortunately, as Loutzenheiser (1996) puts it regarding discussing homophobia in schools, "The threat or the *possibility* of religious or community disagreement is often

enough to stop conversations before they begin....What schools fail to realize, however, is that by not confronting homophobia, they are likely condoning it." (p. 59). As with other issues such as women's issues, a teacher can expose students to information and ideas that are new to them, without imposing the ideas on the students. Some of this can be done in the context of the idea that educated people should be aware of different viewpoints, and should at least attempt to understand and tolerate these different viewpoints, even if they have no intention of changing their own minds.

The second aspect of cultural resistance, the societal one, is also hard to combat, but allows a little more room for the possibility of changed views, or at least of increased understanding. Often students have simply not been exposed to "out" homosexuals, or have only seen the most stereotyped gay men, such as those who dress and act very effeminately. When they realize that homosexuals may comprise up to ten percent of the population of any country, and when they hear about or meet a variety of lesbians and gay men, they are more likely to begin to see that except for their sexual identity, homosexuals and heterosexuals are in many ways not very different from each other.

At all times, the challenge for the instructor is to be sensitive to the cultural backgrounds of the students, and yet to gently open up their worlds and their minds, which is, after all, the goal of all education. The balance between these two objectives can be difficult to find, but it is important to keep attempting it, and not to give up because it is difficult. It is important to think about the problem, and to strategize; it is also important to be flexible, to improvise, as each individual situation calls for.

This paper has been focusing on teaching ESL in the United States. As mentioned earlier, it may be even more difficult to introduce lesbian and gay issues if one is teaching ESL classes in some other countries. Teachers have to use their judgment about the environment, and obviously should not (outside or inside the United States) introduce such topics if it would endanger their own or their students' safety, or would jeopardize their jobs.

Another question which arises for the teacher proactively teaching against homophobia is a concern that is perhaps hard to admit to, but that it would be dishonest not to raise. A teacher cannot help but wonder how dealing with lesbian and gay issues will affect her students' perceptions of her. Will they feel she is imposing her views on them? Will they feel she is bringing political issues into the classroom? Will they think that she herself is homosexual? If so, does that bother her? And if so, why? Should a lesbian, gay, or bisexual teacher choose this time to come out? Should a heterosexual teacher make it clear that he himself is heterosexual, perhaps rationalizing that doing so will make students more likely to listen to his message and not dismiss it as partisan? Or should he refuse to address the students' curiosity and intentionally leave it unclear whether he is heterosexual or homosexual, making the point that it doesn't matter? Although there is much validity in the latter stance, in reality it is unlikely that a heterosexual instructor would teach a whole semester without mentioning, for example, his or her spouse or children (as, sadly, LGBT teachers often cannot). And, as mentioned earlier, a heterosexual teacher can use his/her privileged position to give credibility to his/her discussion of lesbian and gay issues.

## Ways of Introducing Sexual Identity Issues in ESL Classes

Perhaps the best approach to introducing lesbian and gay issues in the ESL classroom is to do it as part of a multicultural/equity approach, in the context of fighting racism, sexism, and other forms of discrimination. Carscadden, for example, suggests teaching lesbian and gay issues as part of "thinking multiculturally" (qtd in Shaw, 1992, p. 3). Similarly, Summerhawk (1998) states that "it is my experience that integration of gay themes into a continuing discussion or presentation on diversity or human rights works best" (p. 21). Students may be asked to think about various kinds of discrimination they are aware of or have observed. They may read about various groups which have been oppressed. Discussion may focus on the interrelatedness of these different types of discrimination and oppression.

One of the first related issues instructors need to address is deciding how to handle problems which come up regarding students' discriminating against lesbian and gay students, or making homophobic remarks. Instructors can acknowledge and listen to all views, as long as they are expressed with civility and respect, but homophobic comments should not be allowed to pass without comment, just as racist or sexist comments should not be tolerated. This is one of the hardest points to handle: how far does one let a student speak out, in the name of freedom of expression, and at what point does one say that certain comments are not acceptable? Crumpacker and Vander Haegen (1993) advise that "We should allow prejudiced students to give expression to their views so that they may be responded to as part of the class. It is crucial that the student not feel personally rejected, but at the same time we have to make it clear that the prejudiced views are not condoned" (p. 96). This is helpful advice up to a point, yet it is extremely important not to expose lesbian and gay students in the class to painful comments. At times there seems to be no way of completely reconciling these two goals of open discussion and of protection from prejudice. Yet instructors must keep trying to reconcile them, figuring out how to handle each situation as it evolves.

But teachers should go beyond putting out such fires as they occur. They can be proactive in countering homophobia, by setting up safe classrooms, and by introducing lesbian and gay issues. Barnard (1994) offers some useful overarching principles, including the following: "Do not assume that all your students are straight"; "Set an example by not using heterosexist language"; "Ensure that your students have easy access to addressing queer issues and that queer students feel that they can make their queer voices heard" (pp. 26-27).

Some indirect ways of promoting acceptance and tolerance are to matter-of-factly include references to lesbians and gays in the course of giving examples or doing grammar or vocabulary exercises, as well as on tests. "Identify the correct form of the verb: Jay and his partner Tom are living/live/have lived together for five years." "Try to figure out from

the context the meaning of the phrase 'survived by' in the following sentence: 'Mr. Smith, who recently died of heart disease, is survived by his longtime companion, Patrick Auster.'" One can also mention that certain famous women or men were lesbian or gay. Such mention can provide role models for lesbian and gay students, and show heterosexual students that lesbians and gays are very successful people in all walks of life. It also serves the more general academic purpose of enhancing ESL students' knowledge about important figures in western and nonwestern cultures, knowledge which will be useful in their university studies.

Teachers can also listen and watch for opportunities to address students' interest in, and concerns about, lesbian and gay related topics. For example, every Halloween some students in my ESL classes mention that they plan to attend Halloween celebrations in a predominantly gay area of the city where I teach. They speak of the costumes and the revelry, and they wonder about why some gay men dress as women. They wonder about gay culture, and why it is so open and accepted in some U.S. cities. These questions present an opportunity to explore the students' concerns and give them straightforward information in a matter-of-fact way, at the same time modeling openness and acceptance of various sexual identities and lifestyles.

Sometimes the opportunity to address sexual identity comes to us more forcefully, even tragically. Many educators, along with most other people, were shocked by the murder of Matthew Shepard, a gay University of Wyoming student who in a 1998 hate crime was beaten, burned, and tortured; he was left tied to a fence for many hours, was finally discovered, and died several days later. This event was featured prominently in the news media, and because it was so shocking, brought about many classroom discussions. Benesch (1999) describes, as an example of teaching critical thinking, the way in which she facilitated discussion of this event in her EAP class. She particularly helped her students explore the assumption held by some "that heterosexual men are justified in responding to the presence of homosexual men with anger or violence to assert a traditional notion of

masculinity" (p. 577) and she concluded that "Although one lesson or course cannot wipe out homophobia or other dangerous attitudes, the students in this class were asked to consider alternatives to intolerance and violence as reactions to difference, values I communicate to all my students, knowing that they may or may not choose to adopt them" (p. 579).

In addition to responding to related questions and events, teachers can design and teach units on issues related to sexual identity. One way into the topic is to present students with the shocking facts regarding the extent of discrimination and violence against LGBTs, and particularly to present the problems which young homosexual and bisexual people have, such as prejudice at school and from their own families. Schweers (1996), for example, decided after 28 years of teaching ESL that he must talk about gay issues with students, and chose to teach a unit focusing on the high rate of suicide among gay and lesbian teens. This is something students near the same age can understand and feel the sadness of.

I myself (Vandrick, 1995) and others write regarding including women's issues, and references to women, in ESL classes; some of the same ideas and techniques apply to inclusion of lesbian and gay issues. My point is that mention of women does not have to be out of context; it can be and should be, generally, part of the instruction that is going on regarding different types or genres of publications that a student needs to be familiar with in any case. So, just as

> Readings on women's issues can be integrated into various units and activities related to academic reading. A newspaper article on a women's issue can be part of a unit on reading magazines and newspapers and how this differs from reading an academic text or other types of books, (Vandrick, 1995, p. 5)

so too can readings on lesbian and gay issues be integrated into the teaching of language and academic skills which is already taking place.

Many teachers have found that an effective way to address sexual identity is to focus on sympathetic lesbian/gay characters from literature or film, or even song. Summerhawk

(1998) has successfully used the books The Color Purple (Walker, 1982) and the films "Maurice," "My Own Private Idaho," and "Philadelphia" in her EFL classes. Again, these books or films are not being taught only to raise lesbian and gay issues; they are being taught because they are good art, and because reading or seeing them, and discussing and writing about them, will promote students' learning of language and academic skills.

Other teachers bring in guest speakers on various aspects of LGBT life. These speakers serve to emphasize to students that lesbians and gays are not exotic, not Other, but are people all around us, somebody's daughters and sons, sisters and brothers, doing everyday jobs in everyday places. Once again, in addition to learning about lesbian and gay lives and issues, students are practicing listening, note taking, discussing, and writing, all in English, all about topics which university students should be aware of. They are also practicing the academic skills of critical listening, synthesizing information and ideas, formulating questions, expressing opinions, using acceptable forms of agreeing or disagreeing with others, and so on. Many of these skills are already major focuses in ESL classes, especially writing classes, where concepts of audience, voice, thesis and support, countering opposing views, using persuasive strategies, and being aware of one's audience are all central.

In writing classes, teachers often assign "what if..." or "imagine that..." essays. Just as students can be asked to imagine and write about how their lives would be different if they were born in a different country, or born a different sex, they can be asked to write about how their lives would be different if they were homosexual (or heterosexual, if they choose to reveal that they are homosexual). This assignment would be most appropriate after reading about and discussion of the lives of lesbians and gays. Also it might work better after the students have already been asked in prior classes to imagine other kinds of different lives. Teachers who feel that some students would just be too uncomfortable with this topic could offer it as one choice among several topics.

In addition to these ways of bringing sexual identity issues into the ESL classroom, a teacher can send clear signals that a student can feel safe in discussing these issues with the teacher, and perhaps even coming out to the teacher, maybe in private, maybe in a journal entry. This information should of course in no case be shared with anyone else, particularly other members of the class, unless the student chooses to share it with them.

An instructor can also tell a class in general, and any student who comes out in particular, about any relevant resources (some of which may be helpful for both homosexual and heterosexual students) available at the university or in the community. For example, teachers can tell all ESL students about the campus counseling center and what it offers, and about local clinics which do confidential testing for AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases. They may list clubs, especially if there is a club for lesbian and gay students, and support groups on campus. Many ESL students are not aware of these resources, or may think it would be shameful to join them; a teacher's telling about them may give students the information they need, and also may provide a certain credibility and acceptability to making use of these resources.

Even if some of the above makes a difference to a few students, it will have been worth it. We cannot underestimate the need of lesbian and gay students to be validated and to be safe, and the need of heterosexual students to see models of acceptance of homosexual students. As Besner and Spungin (1995) write, "Students look to educators for guidance and exposure to information about attitudes, knowledge, and feelings....Teacher attitudes may provide the validation for the student's self-acceptance or self-rejection" (p. 98).

## Instructional Materials

It is not enough to improve one's own teaching in this regard. Instructors should also be aware of inclusion in writing, publishing, and choosing textbooks. If one writes ESL writing materials, one should be inclusive. Some authors who do not do so (which is to say, most authors) have, according to a recent survey of ESL authors, "censored

themselves because they thought their publisher might or because of cultural concerns or market concerns" (Homogeneity, 1996, p. 4), and these may be issues writers have to struggle with. But many more simply "lacked awareness of gays and lesbians in their lives and as an issue" (Homogeneity, 1996, p. 4). In fact, publishers do seem to be cautious about including lesbian and gay themes or materials. It is important to note, however, as I mentioned in the introduction, that though lesbian and gay themes are rare in ESL textbooks, there are a few authors and publishers who have included them, and they deserve credit for doing so.

Those who do create inclusive materials may find that other teachers are quite receptive to using those materials. For example, Levey and Massin (1996) describe making a video, "Both My Moms' Names are Judy: Children of Lesbians and Gays Speak Out," which they initially used in their own ESL classes; they soon found that heterosexual colleagues were enthusiastically using the video in their classes as well. In any case, a teacher choosing textbooks and other instructional materials should be aware of whether the materials are inclusive and represent lesbian and gays and their lives.

## Student Responses

ESL instructors, or instructors of composition classes which include international students, may wonder about students' responses to these topics. Some teachers who have included material on sexual identity issues in class have experienced negative reactions from students. Others have had extremely positive experiences. Levey and Massin (1996) report that when colleagues (not necessarily gay or lesbian) showed their video about children of lesbians and gays, their ESL students became very involved and discussed the video intensely. Many students wrote afterward that they had a new understanding of the lives of lesbian and gay people, and that now viewed gays and lesbians much more positively. Schweers (1996) writes that when he taught a unit on suicide among gay and lesbian adolescents, students were truly interested in the topic. Interestingly, he felt that "after this

experience, my classes were more united. We had talked about some previously unmentionable topics as mature, inquiring adults...I believe there was growth" (p. 7).

Most teachers' experiences probably fall between these two poles. In my classes, students have been on the whole fairly receptive to occasional discussion of lesbian and gay issues and lives. However, there is often some initial reluctance or resistance to discussing the issues. Students sometimes giggle nervously when the topic arises. Or they become very quiet, perhaps looking down at their books, or feigning indifference or even boredom. An occasional student, almost always male, will make a "macho" joke about gays, or perhaps make a mocking stereotypical gesture such as displaying a limp wrist. Some students proclaim their lack of prejudice, while at the same time making sure that their classmates and instructor understand that they themselves are not homosexual. But after this initial posturing, we have had some honest and fruitful discussions, and some students have said that they just hadn't known some of the information, and were glad to have learned more about the topic.

Often students who will not discuss the issue in class will write about it in follow-up journal entries or essays. Sometimes these writings are about friends or relatives who are lesbian or gay. Other times they describe the students' own struggles with the issue. As the instructor reading these responses, I am encouraged by the fact that the students are engaging with the issue, exploring and questioning their own feelings and stances.

Some lesbian and gay ESL teachers, whether they are open about their homosexuality or students have simply sensed it, have reported that students have come out to them privately. Lubetsky (1998) writes of an ESL student in Japan who wrote a letter to his teacher stating that "the reason why I'm writing is because I don't know anybody who shares the same sexual orientation as mine except you. I found myself totally alone and there's nobody I can really talk to...Have you ever thought of committing suicide? Well, I have...I just feel I'm lost" (44). Fortunately this student's teacher was able to talk to and help the student. Kappra (1998/1999) writes of a gay ESL student who thought he would

find acceptance in the liberal city in the U.S. where his ESL program was located, yet found that within the ESL program there was no mention of the existence of homosexuality, and that many activities, both in and out of the classes, seemed to presume universal heterosexuality. For example, the student was asked several times in class about his girlfriend, with the clear assumption that he had a girlfriend. I believe that lesbian and gay students are also more likely to come out to heterosexual teachers who show a positive attitude toward various sexual orientations, and who try to establish an atmosphere of safety in the classroom regarding sexual identity as well as other areas of "difference."

## Conclusion

Given that there is now a view among many ESL professionals that critical pedagogy is an important approach to the teaching of ESL, and of writing to nonnative speakers of English, it seems most appropriate that ESL and L2 writing programs and educators give attention to the rights, needs, and inclusion of LGBT students, and to the education of all students on sexual identity issues. Further, given that queer theory and other manifestations of academic attention to LGBT issues have found a secure and growing place in academe in the United States, it may be time for ESL and L2 writing researchers/scholars to explore ways in which sexual identity issues manifest themselves in ESL and L2 writing settings. Second language writing scholars have begun to investigate issues of ethnicity, class and gender in writing classes; now it may be time to begin researching, theorizing, and having professional conversations about sexual identity issues as well. Perhaps such scholarship will play a role not only in educating educators and by extension their students, but also in demystifying and destigmatizing sexual identity issues.

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